

# How You Can Enter The Kingdom Of God

What does God require of a person before granting him the gift of eternal life and assurance of entry into the Kingdom? Must the truly-converted Christian, through combining good "works" with his faith, reach a certain level of spiritual perfection before he is qualified for entry into the Kingdom? *When*, precisely, can a person experience the joy of salvation, with full assurance that if he were to die tomorrow he would rise to meet Christ at His return, and live eternally in the Kingdom of God?

According to Wilson Ewin, author of a booklet titled *There Is Therefore Now No Condemnation*, the Bible teaches that anyone who "places his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His Blood shed at Calvary is eternally secure. He can never lose his salvation. No personal breaking of God's or man's laws or commandments can nullify that status."

This view seems to align with the view expressed by a group of church leaders who were trying to determine the best way to deal with certain members who were engaging in fornication. The group decided to "get them saved first," and *then*, after they were "saved," deal with the sin. The idea was that once the offenders had "accepted Christ," presumably by going down to the church altar in a public confession of faith, the Holy Spirit (along with the urging of the church leaders) would lead them to abandon their sinful activity. The leaders apparently felt that, even if the offenders continued sinning, and even if they had to be excommunicated from fellowship, at least everyone could go about their lives with the satisfaction that the offending parties were "eternally secure." Of course, such an idea stands in bold opposition to the teachings of the New Testament.

The apostle Paul wrote, "Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things *shall not inherit the kingdom of God*" (Galatians 5:19-21, RSV, emphasis added).

Paul's warning was not restricted to those who had not yet been "saved." *Anyone*, he said, who engages in the "works of the flesh" shall *not* inherit the Kingdom. Had he been speaking of the unsaved only, it would have been pointless to say, "I warn *you*..."--that is, *you* who have received the Holy Spirit, *you* who have had your sins blotted out through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

The idea that a person cannot lose his salvation through the personal breaking of God's commandments is clearly *false!*

However, on the other end of the spectrum is a view that is equally false. According to that view, the person who has received the Holy Spirit must, through a long period of character building, "qualify" for entry into the Kingdom of God. This latter view was

well-expressed several years ago when a minister took questions from a large audience. One question went something like this: "My uncle repented of his sins and accepted Christ as Savior, and was subsequently baptized. But two days later, he had a heart attack and died. Will my uncle enter into the Kingdom of God upon the return of Christ?"

The minister's reply went something like this: "No, your uncle did not have sufficient time to build the character required for entry into the Kingdom. He will be resurrected as a mortal human being, and will then be given sufficient time to qualify for the Kingdom through the process of overcoming and character building."

The concept of "qualifying" within a given time-frame has left more than a few wondering whether they would *ever* "make it" into the Kingdom. For them, there is little room for rejoicing in the assurance of salvation.

This view is nothing less than a doctrine of salvation by works, or, at the very least, salvation by a combination of faith and good works. Its adherents believe that they, through diligent effort, must "earn" the right of entry.

This is clearly contrary to the teaching of the Bible.

### **The Holy Spirit as a Guarantee**

Paul, comparing the present human condition with the immortality God's people will be clothed with in the future, wrote, "For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee" (2 Corinthians 5:4,5).

The Holy Spirit is granted freely to the repentant believer. The Spirit, Paul said, serves as a *guarantee*, or pledge, on eternal life. This means that anyone who has the Spirit can rest assured that even if he dies tomorrow he will, upon the return of Jesus Christ, enter into life everlasting in God's Kingdom.

The idea that a person who has the Holy Spirit must then "qualify" for entry into the Kingdom by reaching a certain standard of spiritual perfection was completely foreign to Paul's thinking. He saw the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of life everlasting, and believed that anyone who had the Spirit had the guarantee.

Of course, the assurance of salvation provided by the Holy Spirit is a *conditional* assurance, but an assurance nonetheless. The conditional element involves continuing in the faith, which includes refraining from sinful behavior. Spiritual growth will occur in the process, and is important, but it is a mistake to assume that salvation itself is dependent upon reaching a certain level of spiritual development between baptism and death.

The concept that salvation must be "achieved" through character building only leads to frustration. In spite of efforts to prepare themselves for the return of Christ, many who hold this view feel they are never quite "ready" to face Christ. They realize they still have faults, that they still succumb to temptation on occasion, and that they still experience the occasional reemergence of old habits and weaknesses. Upon examining their lives, they feel they have overcome very little since receiving the Holy Spirit, and are left feeling that they are not "ready" for Christ's return.

## **Sealed for the Day of Redemption**

Salvation is comparable to a man, once lost at sea, now safely aboard a fully-functional sea-going vessel. Recalling the perils of the sea--the likelihood of starving, of drowning, or of becoming the next meal of a hungry shark--the man has no intention of jumping overboard. Of course, he could, if he so chose, leave the safety of the ship and return to his former hopeless condition, but he has no intention of doing so. He knows he is on his way to his homeland, and is deeply thankful to the captain of the ship for pulling him aboard.

Safely aboard the vessel, he is fully confident in the integrity of the ship and the captain's navigational ability. He knows he has to take certain precautions during stormy weather, and that diving off the ship to go for a swim--even if someone stands ready to throw a rescue line to him--would be incredibly risky.

When a person is saved--when his sins are blotted off the record and he receives the Holy Spirit--he can be absolutely certain that the "captain of [his] salvation" (Hebrews 2:10, KJV) will take him safely to the desired destination, provided the rescued person doesn't take foolish risks or decide to abandon the ship. As long as he remains in the faith, though he may encounter the stormy seas of trial and temptation along the way, he can rest assured that he is "sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30). Having been saved through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, he does not then have to "qualify" before he is fit for the Kingdom of God. He has been *made* fit, not through personal achievement or an impressive record of good deeds, but by the grace of God, which he receives through faith.

## **The Assurance of Things Hoped For**

Unfortunately, some would object to the above analogy, claiming that it presents a salvation that is too "easy." To them, having the rescued man hanging (with one hand) over the slippery edge of the bow of the ship during stormy weather would provide a more fitting analogy.

It is true that grieving the Holy Spirit or returning to a life of iniquity can break the "seal" whereby the Christian is preserved for the day of redemption (Ephesians 4:30; II Timothy 2:19), but it is *not* true that loss of salvation is as easy or accidental as slipping on an oil-coated banana peel. Nor is it true that the saved person must have a certain number of years wherein he must "qualify" for entry into the Kingdom of God.

Faith is not uncertainty; it is certainty. It is assurance, confidence. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). If our hope is the coming Kingdom of God, then we should await it with assurance, believing that we will enter into it. We should not think that our salvation is hanging by a thread, or that it is almost out of reach.

The New Testament is replete with faith-inspiring words of encouragement and assurance.

The Christian hope is founded upon the promises of God, which are described as "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:19), and which provide "strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us" (verse 18).

Our assurance is not based upon our own limited strength, but upon the power of "him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing" (Jude 24). By God's power, His people "are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

The Christian may feel like giving up at times, and may even experience the reemergence of old habits, or slip and stumble when confronted with temptation, but God does not so easily give up on His children. "For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Hebrews 12:6). God's disciplinary measures may seem severe at times, but we, if we are His people, can find solace in knowing that the discipline we must endure is evidence that "God is treating [us] as sons" (verse 7), and that He "disciplines us for our good" (verse 10). Our faith may waver from time to time, but God remains steadfast.

At times, God's people may think the odds are against them. It may seem that the trials of life are more than they can endure. Paul's words are reassuring:

*If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-39).*

Does that sound like a salvation that is supported by nothing more than the strength of a thread? Does it sound like a salvation that is easily lost? Hardly!

Paul's assurance centers on "Christ Jesus ... who indeed intercedes for us." His prayer, offered up to God on the night before His death, reflects His intercessory office.

Jesus prayed, "And now I am no more in the world, but they [His disciples] are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.... I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one" (John 17:11,15).

Surely these words proved to be a source of tremendous encouragement for the apostles after Jesus' departure to heaven. They knew that Jesus, whom they had seen ascending to heaven, had prayed specifically for them, that through the Father's name (His power) they might continue in the faith, protected from the overwhelming power of the devil.

### **Jesus Christ: Our Source of Assurance**

Every week, many sick and afflicted individuals ask us (the ministers of the home office of the Church of God, International) to pray for them. Some of them tell us they have a greater feeling of confidence when they know that others are praying on their behalf. Think of the confidence the apostles must have felt as they recalled the words Jesus spoke on their behalf in His last night as a mortal human being. After all, it was not a small group of flawed human beings praying for them; it was *Jesus Christ himself!*

In our human weakness, we may sometimes wonder whether God hears us when we cry out to Him for help. But few of us would doubt that God heard the prayers of Jesus. If we could know that Jesus prayed for us, just as He prayed for the apostles whom He sent, we could no doubt face the trials of life with reassurance, confidence, and courage.

The good news is that Jesus did pray for us--His modern-day disciples--in the same prayer He offered on behalf of His first disciples. He said, "I do not pray for these [His first disciples] only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us..." (John 17:20,21).

If you have turned to God in repentance, looking to Jesus Christ as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2), the "apostle and high priest of our confession" (Hebrews 3:1), and the "source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:9), then Jesus' prayer applies to you as much as it applied to His first disciples. Listen to His words:

*The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them* (John 17:22-26).

Here we have the very prayer Jesus offered on our behalf. Did God hear Him? Most assuredly! Did God *answer* that prayer? Definitely! Is He still honoring Jesus' request today? No doubt about it!

Remember, Jesus' prayer is reflective of His present ministry as High Priest, and gives us a glimpse of the requests He *now* makes, before God, on behalf of His disciples.

What could be more reassuring than to know that Jesus Christ is praying for you?

No doubt, it was this same reassuring knowledge that enabled the early disciples to do the work of God in spite of personal weaknesses.

### **The Early Disciples: Flawed but Faithful**

The first-century disciples were really no different from Christ's modern-day disciples. We think of how they endured persecution and hardships of every sort, yet remained faithful to their calling, but perhaps we don't fully realize that their weaknesses were very much like our own.

Take Simon Peter, for example. On one occasion, long after his conversion, fear of what others might think and of the possible consequences moved Peter to behave in a manner contrary to the truth of the gospel. The matter was so serious that Paul was compelled to rebuke him openly.

It happened in Antioch. Peter, ignoring a commonly-held Jewish tradition, dined with the gentile converts. But when the "party of the circumcision" arrived on the scene, Peter parted company with the gentiles, and was soon joined by the other Jews who were there (Galatians 2:11-13).

It was Peter who had earlier received the vision revealing that he was to no longer call any man common or unclean (Acts 10). Yet, by removing himself from the gentiles, he was sending the message that these people *were* in fact "unclean." Not only was this action contrary to the truth Peter had personally received by divine revelation, it was a slap in the faces of the gentiles. Had Paul not acted immediately, the divisive nature of Peter's behavior might have seriously damaged the unity of the church.

What's interesting is that Peter's behavior was the manifestation of an old weakness--one he had struggled with many years earlier.

When Jesus came to his disciples walking on the sea, it was Peter who said, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." On Christ's approval, Peter climbed out of the boat and walked on water. Unfortunately, "when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me.' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'O man of little faith, why did you doubt?'" (Matthew 14:25-31).

At first, Peter seemed to be strong in faith. He climbed out of the boat, stepped out on the water, and began to walk. But as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus and began thinking of the surrounding conditions, he stopped walking by faith and began walking by sight (see 2 Corinthians 5:7). *Fear* filled his mind. His faith wavered.

Later, after hearing Jesus say, "You will all fall away because of me this night...", Peter boldly replied, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away."

Jesus knew better. He said, "Truly I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." But Peter insisted, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." He seemed confident, fearless--but his warrior courage was short-lived.

True to Christ's prophecy, Peter denied Him three times--all within a few hours of boldly declaring his invulnerable loyalty (Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75). Once again, *fear* brought Peter face-to-face with his own human inability.

Yet, in spite his weakness, Peter proved to be a most powerful messenger, faithfully carrying out the duties Christ had given him. He was flawed, but faithful. His faithfulness was not a reliance upon his own strength, but upon the strength of the One who pulled him from the water. He knew he was in good hands.

Like Peter, Paul was not without his weaknesses. He wrote:

*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.*

*So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members (Romans 7:15-23).*

If anyone ever recognized his own human limitations, it was Paul. Yet, he remained confident that he would one day enter the Kingdom of God. He later wrote, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom" (II Timothy 4:18).

Those who are discouraged because they recognize their own human failings should pay careful attention to the solution Paul offers. He wrote:

*Wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 7:24,25 — 8:1-4).*

Did you notice? There is *now* no condemnation for those who are in Christ. The "law of sin and death" that wars in our members may remind us of our weaknesses and flaws, but cannot of itself nullify the "no condemnation" status. Paul was fully confident of ultimate deliverance from "this body of death."

### **Abraham: Faithful, But Not Flawless**

When we think of faith, perhaps we think of Abraham. But when we think of Abraham's faith, perhaps we feel we simply don't measure up--especially if we think God requires us to have the kind of faith Abraham had.

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

How many of us have that kind of faith? Would we be able to do what Abraham was prepared to do?

Abraham knew his descendants would be named through Isaac, which meant that even if Isaac were put to death God would have to raise him to life in order to fulfill His promise. Even so, the thought of slitting his son's throat and watching him bleed to death must have been agonizing. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us will admit that we are not sure whether we would be able to carry out the task.

Little wonder we feel our faith is so inadequate when we compare ourselves to Abraham.

But wait! There is more to Abraham's story than this one example. The truth is, Abraham himself occasionally walked by sight rather than by faith. Yet, he is still called the "friend of God" (II Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23).

When God commanded Abraham to move from his homeland to another land, promising to make of him a great nation, Abraham obeyed (Genesis 12:1-4). Later, God appeared to Abraham and said, "To your descendants I will give this land" (verse 7). This promise was reiterated several times during Abraham's life.

The New Testament tells us that Abraham believed God, and that his obedience was evidence of his faith. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to



go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:8-10).

From the beginning, Abraham believed God's promises. He believed he would have descendants, and that God would give them the land he had shown to him. This could only mean that Abraham knew that he would have sons. After all, how could his *descendants* inherit the land of promise if he remained childless?

Yet, an interesting event that occurred during Abraham's sojourning indicates that the father of the faithful did not always keep God's promises in the forefront of his mind. The account is found in Genesis 12:10-13:

Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sar'ai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account."

Did you catch it? Abraham *knew* that God had promised to give the land of Canaan to his *descendants*. Yet, on this occasion, Abraham (who had no children as yet) *was afraid that the Egyptians would kill him!* What happened to his faith in God's promise? Didn't he know that in order to have descendants God would have to preserve his life at least until a son was born to him?

Moreover, to preserve his life, Abraham was willing to allow his wife to be taken into Pharaoh's harem (verse 15). This was certainly not in agreement with the good and perfect will of God, as the account clearly shows; yet, Abraham was a *willing participant* in the affair!

A person might reason that Abraham did not really have faith at this point in his life, but that is simply not true. The book of Hebrews tells us clearly that Abraham's departure from his homeland was an act of faith. His faith was evident from the beginning!

The fact is, Abraham was human--as human as we are. His willingness to allow his wife to be taken into Pharaoh's harem in order to save his own skin shows that the father of the faithful was an imperfect human being. The important lesson for us is that Abraham never threw up his hands in defeat. In spite of the weakness that led him to temporarily walk by sight, Abraham continued on walking by faith, looking forward to the city with permanent foundations--the city whose builder and maker is God.

Long after the incident in Egypt, Abraham again demonstrated his humanity. The account is found in Genesis 16:1,2:

Now Sar'ai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar; and Sar'ai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sar'ai.

Since Sarah's suggestion reflects the common practice of the time, a person might reason that Abraham honestly thought that it was God's will to give him a son through Hagar. And, indeed, he may have thought this was God's will.

However, since Abraham could not have been certain that this was God's will, *why didn't he ask God?* After all, God had appeared to him and revealed His will several times in the past. Why should Abraham now assume that God would not make His will known?

Abraham and Sarah took it upon *themselves* to determine God's will, and they attempted to fulfill His promise by their own "works."

Here again is an example of Abraham's flawed humanity. He was imperfect; yet, God regarded him a *righteous* man. "And he [Abraham] believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

Abraham did not "qualify" for the Kingdom of God through a lifetime of building character. God declared him "qualified" on the basis of faith. As Paul wrote, "For if Abraham was justified [declared righteous] by works [by his deeds, his actions], he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'" (Romans 4:2,3).

Had God dealt with Abraham according to strict justice, his hope in the "city which has foundations" would have been in vain. But because God reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness, Abraham died with full assurance of God's promises.

## **What About You?**

How many of God's people have felt their faith was inadequate? How many have experienced frustration, perhaps depression, because of old habits that reemerged from time to time, or because of addictions they were unable to conquer, or because they seemed to make so little progress in overcoming their own human urges and feelings?

How many people have come to a knowledge of the truth but have put off baptism because they felt unworthy, or because they were fearful that they might fail to live up to God's standards after being baptized?

If you fall into either of the above categories, take heart! Salvation is not lost as easily or accidentally as hitting the wrong key on a typewriter. Nor is it gained through mere human efforts. It is the *gift of God*, and is granted to those who *believe* God; those who truly desire to obey God, even though they occasionally slip and stumble.

If you have put off baptism because of frustration over personal weaknesses, then pick up the phone and give us a call. (Our number is [903] 825-2525.) We will do our best to put you in touch with someone who can counsel you. Don't put it off any longer.

If you are a baptized member of God's church, but fear that your faith is lacking, perhaps because you feel you have failed too many times in your battle against the "law of sin and death" that wars in your members, or because you have made too many wrong choices, then simply ask for God's help, do the best you can, and go on believing that God will strengthen you, and that He is able to keep you from falling.

Continue attending Sabbath services. Continue coming to the Feast of Tabernacles and the other annual festivals. If you attend God's feasts because you know He wants you to be there, and because you want to learn more of Him and His plan, then your presence at the festivals is evidence of faith, for if you did not *believe God* you would not attend.

Reread the scriptures cited in this article. Study the inspiring eighth chapter of the book of Romans. Examine the examples of faith listed in Hebrews 11, and note especially that genuine faith is often made evident through acts and deeds that are well within reach, and are accomplished by people with faults and flaws not unlike your own.

Above all, realize that the One who said that no man is able to pluck His disciples out of His hand (John 10:28) intercedes on *your* behalf. Study the prayer He offered (John 17). Realize that Jesus Christ prayed for *you* just as He prayed for His first disciples, and that His prayer reflects His continuing work as our Intercessor.

While it is true that a person can lose his salvation by willfully turning away from God and returning to a life of sinful behavior, there is nothing on this earth that can force you to make that decision. As long as you choose not to turn from God, your eternal salvation is as secure as anything could be. Like Paul, you can go about your life with complete confidence that God will deliver you from every evil, and preserve you unto His heavenly Kingdom (2 Timothy 4:18).

Never take your eyes off Jesus Christ, for in Him, no burden of this life can separate you from the love of God (Romans 8:28-39). It was He who said:

*"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30).

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